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Losers, Villains, and Violence: Political Attacks, Incivility, and Support for Political Violence

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Political violence, while rare, continues to be a concern. Yet scholars have only recently begun testing the effects language might have on support for violence. This project examines whether different types of verbal political attacks—those related to personal- and public-level incivility—affect support for violence through perceptions of impoliteness and attributions of out-group malevolence. Two experiments conducted in the United States test the effects of political attacks in two contexts: Twitter and issue speeches. Across both studies, both types of attacks prompted perceptions of impoliteness and attributions of malevolence. In the speech context, both types of political attacks *decreased* support for violence through impoliteness perceptions, and personal-level incivility *increased* identification with violent likeminded protesters through malevolence attributions. Optimistically, attacks may make social norms salient to individuals, decreasing their support for other social norm violations, like violence. Less optimistically, attacks may increase identification with groups fighting back against the verbal attacker.

Keywords: political violence, incivility, impoliteness, malevolence, experiment

Political violence, while rare, continues to be a warranted concern ("Measuring Political Violence," 2015). Verbal attacks against political opponents (called "attacks" throughout this article) may be a contributing factor. On one hand, attacks and uncivil exchanges increase interest and engagement in politics (Brooks & Geer, 2007; Mutz, 2015). On the other hand, they decrease perceptions of legitimacy and trust in government (Mutz, 2015). Scacco, Coe, and Harness (2018) offer examples of individuals who experienced threats of violence after being verbally attacked by political elites. Although experiments have linked explicitly

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violent metaphors and support for political violence (Kalmoe, 2014), researchers have not examined the role attacks—particularly uncivil verbal attacks—play in the public's attitudes toward political violence.

We approach support for political violence as approval of the aggressive behaviors citizens may use against political leaders. Simply supporting violence can be problematic because citizens may become suspicious toward resolving conflicts through peaceful means (Kalmoe, 2014). Nontrivial minorities of people in the United States (Kalmoe, 2014) and some European countries ("Measuring Political Violence," 2015) express support for violent political behavior. Research often investigates societal contexts or individual-level factors (Wade & Reiter, 2007) rather than the messages that trigger support for violence. Yet politicians (Obama, 2011) and citizens ("NPR/PBS NewsHour/Marist," 2018) express concern that negative political language produces a culture supportive of political violence. In sum, while people point to language as a potential cause of political violence, there have been few studies empirically testing this link.

We examine how two elements of political attacks relate to support for violence. First, drawing from incivility research (Muddiman, 2017; Mutz, 2015; Papacharissi, 2004), we test whether different *types* of attacks (personal- and public-level incivility) prompt differences in support for violence. Theoretically, attacks against the political legitimacy of an opponent should be more normatively troubling than other insults leveled against opponents (Burke, 1937; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). We test whether individuals react to such differences. Second, we investigate the mechanisms through which these messages may influence support for violence, studying whether perceptions of impoliteness (Mutz, 2015), attributions of malevolence toward the out-group political party (Warner & Villamil, 2017), or both prompt changes in support for violence. We address these theoretically and practically important concerns through two experimental studies conducted in the United States.

Verbal Attacks and Political Incivility

Verbal political attacks have been studied in campaign settings, where scholars differentiate between negative (but issue-focused and relevant) attacks on an opponent and uncivil attacks that are inflammatory and insulting (Brooks & Geer, 2007; Fridkin & Kenney, 2008). Researchers admit, however, that the tests tend not to "represent incivility in its strongest form" (Brooks & Geer, 2007, p. 5). Recent innovations in the study of political incivility (Muddiman, 2017) can explicate different types of attacks. Most approaches to incivility center on disrespect (Coe, Kenski, & Rains, 2014), though they differ on whether that respect is centered at a personal level and guided by politeness (Mutz, 2015) or at the public level and guided by the democratic norms that form the foundation of a governmental system (Papacharissi, 2004).

Personal-level incivility is exemplified by Mutz's (2015) work on in-your-face politics. To Mutz, incivility is characterized by actions "that [violate] the norms of politeness" (p. 6). She and others (Borah, 2014; Brooks & Geer, 2007; Thorson, Vraga, & Ekdale, 2010) examine the implications of candidates and citizens who yell, interrupt, and name-call each other. In the literature focusing on uncivil attacks specifically, studies tend to test the effects of words such as "unethical" (Brooks & Geer, 2007, p. 5), "liar" (Fridkin & Kenney, 2008, p. 701), and "misguided" "whiners" (Thorson et al., 2010, p. 299). These instances of uncivil attacks focus largely on impugning the character of a politician or party.

Public-level incivility approaches, alternatively, assume that incivility is more than impoliteness. Researchers have examined exaggerated argumentation strategies in news stories (Sobieraj & Berry, 2011) and disorderly political systems in which partisans refuse to engage with their opponents (Entman, 2011). Public-level incivility focuses on violations of democratic norms rather than violations of politeness norms (Papacharissi, 2004). In this way, public-level incivility relates more closely to Uslaner's (1996) research on comity than to politeness. Public-level incivility is the refusal to make arguments that appeal to the public good (Rawls, 1993), the refusal to approach opposing groups in a way that promotes reciprocity (Uslaner, 1996), and the threatening of democracy more broadly (Papacharissi, 2004).

Public-level incivility has not been addressed in research examining political attacks—possibly because examples that come to mind are often behaviors (e.g., government dysfunction; Muddiman, 2017) rather than verbal attacks. Yet theorists have discussed specific types of attacks on political opponents that—while they all involve name-calling—align with public-level incivility. We suggest that inspiration for theoretical development on this issue can be found in the writing of literary critic Kenneth Burke (1937), who developed the concept of the tragic frame. The tragic frame is one of Burke's "broad symbolic-interpretive categories of acceptance, rejection, and transition" (Souders & Dillard, 2014, p. 1011) that can influence the relationship between communication (in Burke's terminology, symbolic action) and behavior.

In developing his conception of the tragic frame, Burke proffered that political attacks assign different motives to the person under attack. "Call a man a villain," Burke (1937) writes, "and you have the choice of either attacking or cringing. Call him mistaken, and you invite yourself to attempt setting him right" (pp. 4–5). An attack can suggest that opponents are engaging in a good-faith effort to improve society, but fail because they advocate wrongheaded means, or, conversely in the tragic frame, that opponents are villains with malevolent intentions. More recently, Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) discuss the authoritarian implications of attacks that impugn the legitimacy of one's opponents. They suggest that denying legitimacy to opponents is one of four indicators of authoritarianism, advising scholars to be mindful of political figures who "describe their rivals as subversive, or opposed to the existing constitutional order" (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018, p. 66). Both Burke's (1937) tragic frame and Levitsky and Ziblatt's (2018) concern about legitimacy attacks align with a public-level incivility perspective. Rather than simply using insulting language, political figures can (and do) attempt to delegitimize their opponents through their attacks, turning them into villains who must be stopped at all costs.

In this study, we contrast both personal- and public-level incivility with civility, which includes messages that *meet* the norms of politeness and democracy. Some studies conceptualize civility as a lack of incivility—for instance, removing insulting language and eye-rolling from experimental stimuli (Borah, 2014; Mutz, 2015). We adopt a more active definition. Rather than disrespecting others, civil messages communicate the worthiness of a political opponent and desire to engage with the out-group by emphasizing reciprocity (Uslaner, 1996).

Specifically, we investigate incivility in the context of verbal attacks on one's political in-group (that is, Republicans verbally attacking Democrats, or vice versa). Tajfel and Turner's (1979) self-categorization theory suggests that there are contexts in which an individual's social identity is heightened and people seek positive distinctiveness by denigrating the out-group. Scholarly evidence is mounting that such feelings of

out-group animosity apply in political settings (e.g., Iyengar, Sood, & Lelkes, 2012; Mason, 2018). While uncivil messages from both in-groups and out-groups may influence individuals' attitudes (e.g., Suhay, Bello-Pardo, & Maurer, 2018), they are especially influential when one sees a member of the out-group engaging in uncivil attacks on one's in-group. When a person's social identity is threatened by an attack from an out-group member, that person is likely to behave defensively (Branscombe, Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1999) and express anger toward the out-group (Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 2002). Empirically, Gervais (2017) found that that commenters may have stronger reactions to incivility when it targets their partisan in-group. Thus, for this test, we focus solely on the effects of verbal attacks from out-group politicians targeting a person's in-group political party.

Though it has received little scholarly attention, public understanding of the difference between personal-level attacks (e.g., *loser*) and public-level attacks (e.g., *traitor*) is normatively important. Political attacks that suggest the former indicate that politicians are bad at their jobs, while those attacks that suggest the latter imply criminal intent and question legitimacy. This project examines whether individuals react differently when their in-groups are approached with civility, personal-level incivility, or public-level incivility, and whether the recognition of those differences indirectly influences support for political violence.

Impoliteness and Malevolence: Indirect Effects on Violence Support

Exposure to partisan incivility may increase affective polarization (Suhay et al., 2018) and encourage others to use incivility in response (Gervais, 2017). Yet whether more serious reactions, such as support for political violence, are prompted by political incivility is unclear. After violent events in the political sphere, leaders often respond by calling for civility. President Obama, for instance, after Rep. Gabby Giffords was shot during a public event in 2011, hoped for "more civility in our public discourse" (Obama, 2011, para. 39), where citizens talk "with each other in a way that heals, not in a way that wounds" (para. 26). Further, the public fears that incivility in political contexts may lead to violence and terrorism ("NPR/PBS NewsHour/Marist," 2018). Although this link between violence and incivility often appears in public discourse, the connection has not been thoroughly theorized and the concept of "civility" in these cases goes largely undefined. We know that people are worried that incivility may lead to violence, but researchers have not tested whether this is actually the case. Thus, this project outlines the potential links between uncivil political attacks and support for political violence.

We do not expect *direct* effects of uncivil attacks on support for political violence, however. Some research examining support for political violence has found the effects to be mediated by other attitudes (Warner & Villamil, 2017). Furthermore, researchers have been examining the importance of *perceptions* of incivility (Kenski, Coe, & Rains, 2020). Muddiman, Pond-Cobb, and Matson (2020), for instance, found that the effects of exposure to incivility in the news were mediated by whether people perceived the news to be uncivil. In the current project, we extend prior work by dividing perceptions to better match the two-level incivility approach. Thus, we test the model outlined in Figure 1 and described in the sections below, examining whether personal- and public-level incivility attacks affect support for violence through (1) impoliteness perceptions and (2) malevolence attributions.

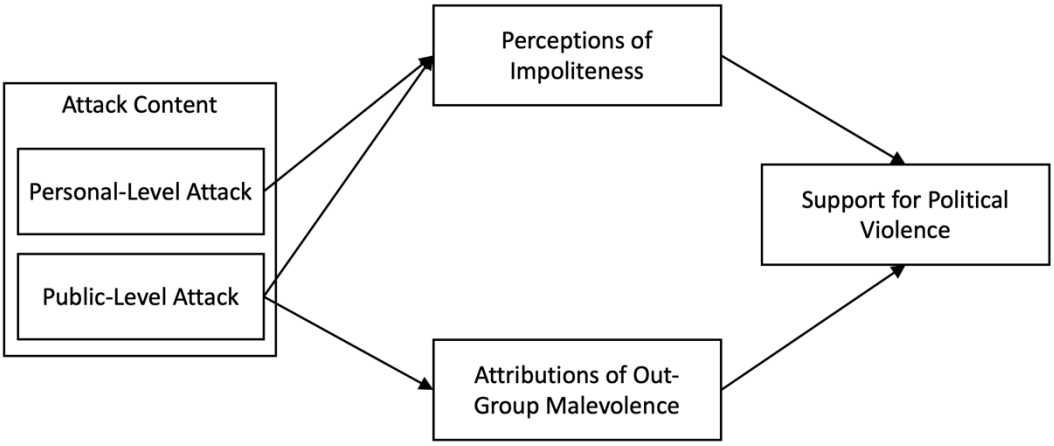


Figure 1. Theoretical model of indirect effects. Note that we use civil messages as a comparison group against personal- and public-level attacks.

Perceptions of Impoliteness

Personal-level incivility research draws heavily from politeness theory, which posits that two individuals in conversation both attempt to protect their self-esteem (Brown & Levinson, 1987). From this perspective, both personal- *and* public-level political attacks involve face-threatening acts. Calling someone incompetent (violating a personal-level norm) or corrupt (violating a public-level norm) should both be considered rude. Thus, exposure to either personal- or public-level attacks should prompt perceptions of impoliteness.

Perceiving impoliteness may or may not increase support for political violence. On one hand, impoliteness can be viewed as less severe than other types of incivility (Papacharissi, 2004), suggesting that perceiving impoliteness will not prompt strong enough reactions to increase support for political violence. Just because a politician is rude does not mean that the target of the rudeness will respond violently. On the other hand, research into workplace incivility provides some academic backing for linking impoliteness and violence support. These studies, which largely define incivility in a manner similar to personal-level incivility (e.g., "low intensity" behaviors that "[violate] norms of mutual respect"; Ghosh, Jacobs, & Reio, 2011, p. 6), theorize an incivility spiral where violations of minor norms of politeness can eventually spiral into more serious deviant behaviors (Ghosh, Dierkes, & Falletta, 2011), such as bullying and violence (Andersson & Pearson, 1999). Tying together this research, we offer a hypothesis linking personal-level and public-level attacks to increased perceptions of impoliteness and, because the relationship has received very little empirical research attention, a research question linking perceptions of impoliteness with support for political violence:

H1: Individuals will perceive personal-level and public-level attacks as more impolite than civil messages.

RQ1: Do personal- and public-level attacks, compared with civil messages, increase support for violence indirectly through perceptions of impoliteness?

Attributions of Malevolence

Public-level incivility should, however, generate responses beyond perceptions of impoliteness. We suggest that attributions of out-group malevolence may provide a path through which public-level attacks affect support for violence. Warner and Villamil (2017) approach malevolence toward an out-group party as the belief that one's political out-group is illegitimate and has "ulterior motives" beyond doing what is best for the country (p. 452). Though tied to negative emotion and affect, malevolence toward the out-group is a distinct concept. Instead of focusing on how favorable or unfavorable people feel toward an out-group member, malevolence focuses on the belief that others in the political system are illegitimate actors (Warner & Villamil, 2017). Judgements like these are based on attributions of intent (see, for instance, intergroup attribution error as discussed by Pettigrew, 1979). For instance, partisans become more suspicious of the motives of out-group (but not in-group) politicians in some legislative contexts (Munro, Weih, & Tsai, 2010). Previous research finds that affect and attributions about the legitimacy of the out-group are related but separate concepts (e.g., Munro et al., 2010; Warner & Villamil, 2017). We focus on malevolence here because it may be one way to determine whether the public recognizes differences between personal- and public-level incivility. Individuals may not attribute malevolence toward the political out-group in reaction to name-calling (personal-level incivility), but they may attribute malevolence toward their out-group party for claiming that their in-group party is treasonous (public-level incivility).

Further, support for violence should be positively linked with attribution of malevolence. Those interested in political polarization have raised the possibility that "dissatisfaction with policy outcomes and democratic institutions can escalate" (e.g., Iyengar et al., 2012, p. 428) and violence may be the ultimate result. As Waytz, Young, and Ginges (2014) argue, motive asymmetry (the belief that the in-group acts out of love and the out-group acts out of hate) can result in violence. Böhm, Rusch, and Gürerk (2016) provide some evidence of this phenomenon occurring in a social dilemma game: Participants were willing to react aggressively and preemptively to defend their in-group when they perceived a threat from the out-group. Attributing malevolence may prompt individuals to perceive the out-group as more threatening and make those individuals more willing to support political violence as a way to defend their in-group (see also Warner & Villamil, 2017). Thus, we raise two hypotheses linking different types of uncivil attacks to attributions of out-group malevolence and, finally, to support for political violence:

H2: Public-level attacks, but not personal-level attacks, will prompt more attributions of malevolence toward the out-group political party compared with civil messages.

H3: Public-level attacks, but not personal-level attacks, will indirectly increase support for political violence through attributions of out-group malevolence.

We conducted two experiments to test these predictions: the first set during a campaign and the second in a speech context. In both tests, we used a three condition between-group experimental

design, exposing participants to either civil messages, personal-level attacks, or public-level attacks from their out-group.

Study 1 Method

Participants

We gathered 199 U.S. participants in August 2016 using Amazon's crowd-sourcing platform MTurk, which produces diverse nonprobability samples useful for experiments (Berinsky, Huber, & Lenz, 2012). Previous research investigating violent language has used the site (Kalmoe, Gubler, & Wood, 2018). Participants were, on average, 38.81 years old (*SD* = 12.73). Fifty-five percent were female, 83% reported being White/Caucasian, 8% Black/African American, 3.5% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 3% another race. Participants had, on average, 15.13 years of education (*SD* = 1.84), which represents work toward a four-year college degree. The participants leaned Democratic (1 = *strong Republican* through 5 = *strong Democrat*; *M* = 3.43, *SD* = 1.50).

Procedure

Participants reported their partisanship, so we could assign them to messages from out-group politicians. Participants then responded to a number of distractor items before being randomly assigned to one of three message groups. Participants viewed four messages, one at a time, and then completed measures related to impoliteness, malevolence, and support for political violence. Once they completed the measures, they were paid $0.50.

Stimuli

Each participant viewed four tweets ostensibly posted by candidates from the participants' out-group political party, so nonpartisan participants are not included in the analysis (see, for stimuli, Online Appendix A[1]). We used four fictional candidates (three men and one woman) running for Congress whose names and images remained consistent across all conditions. We simply varied the use of the labels "Republican" and "Democrat." Two of the tweets directly attacked a specific candidate ("Republican @MichaelHanna is unlucky") and the other two tweets attacked the in-group party more broadly ("The #Democrats have made fools of themselves").

Participants viewed either civil tweets (*n* = 66), personal-level attacks (*n* = 67), or public-level attacks (*n* = 66). The civil messages emphasized that the opposing party and its candidates were worthy of respect, even during a campaign ("Calm down. The #Republicans are worthy opponents and deserve a good campaign"). Messages that included a personal-level attack used language that emphasized stupidity and ineptitude ("The #Democrats are all such enormous jokes. They all are third-rate losers"). Finally, messages

[1] Online supplementary materials available at: https://www.ashleymuddiman.com/research/supplemental/LosersVillainsViolence_IJOC_Appendix.pdf

that included a public-level attack used language that emphasized danger and threat to the nation ("Republican @DougKlein is dangerous. Can't wait to debate this Nazi!").

Support for Political Violence

To measure support for political violence, participants responded to five Likert-type items with options ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*. The items were taken from Kalmoe (2014)[2]: When politicians are damaging the country, citizens should send threats to scare them straight; The worst politicians should get a brick through the window to make them stop hurting the country; Sometimes the only way to stop bad government is with physical force; Some of the problems citizens have with government could be fixed with a few well-aimed bullets; Citizens upset by government should never use violence to express their feelings. All responses were recoded and averaged, with higher numbers indicating more *support for political violence* (range: 1–5, M = 1.92, SD = 0.85, Cronbach's α = .81).

Mediating Variables

Perceptions of impoliteness was measured with five 5-point semantic differential items related to violations of politeness norms. Participants were asked to assess the tweets according whether they were friendly/hostile, emotional/unemotional, calm/agitated, quarrelsome/agreeable, and polite/rude (see Mutz, 2015). All responses were recoded and averaged such that higher numbers indicate more *impoliteness perceptions* (range: 1–5, M = 3.59, SD = 1.35, Cronbach's α = .92).

We measured *attributions of malevolence* with five 5-point Likert-type items that ranged from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree* (Warner et al., 2019; Warner & Villamil, 2017). Participants responded to the following statements about their out-group party: I worry that [Democrats/Republicans] are deliberately trying to hurt America; The [Democrats/Republicans] are knowingly sabotaging the country, The [Democrats/Republicans] don't care about America; I believe the [Democrats/Republicans] genuinely want what's best for America; I trust the [Democrats/Republicans] to do what they think is best for America. The statements were recoded and averaged to create measures of malevolence toward Democrats (Cronbach's α = .93) and Republicans (Cronbach's α = .90) in which higher scores indicated more malevolence. From these ratings, we created a measure of *attributions of malevolence* toward the out-group party by combining Republican participants' ratings of Democrats and Democratic participants' ratings of Republicans (range: 1–5, M = 3.44, SD = 1.01). The two mediating variables were weakly correlated (Pearson's r = .16, $p < .05$).

Analysis

The hypothesized model (Figure 1) was tested in OLS regression using Hayes's (2018) PROCESS SPSS macro (Model 4) with public- and personal-level attacks dummy coded (leaving the civil tweets as the reference group). *Impoliteness perceptions* and *attributions of out-group malevolence* were specified as

[2] We replicated the results of Study 1 and Study 2 with a second measure of support for political violence. See Online Appendix B for details.

parallel mediating variables, and *support for political violence* was entered as the outcome. PROCESS runs OLS regression models to produce coefficients and significance levels for each step in the model, then uses bootstrapping to test whether the indirect effects paths through the two mediating variables are significant.

Because the indirect effects variables were not experimentally manipulated, the link between the stimuli and the outcome variable through the mediating variables is potentially confounded by unobserved variable bias. Following the advice of Hayes (2018), we included variables in the model that may be related to the mediator and outcome variables as statistical controls. Here, we chose participant sex, age, level of conflict avoidance (range: 1 = *enjoys conflict in interpersonal discussion* to 5 = *seeks to avoid conflict in interpersonal discussion*, *M* =3.45, *SD* = 0.98), and partisan strength (range: 1 = *weak partisan* or 2 = *strong partisan, M* = 1.48, *SD* = 0.50) as control variables[3] because previous research has connected such individual characteristics to perceptions of impoliteness (e.g., Kenski et al., 2020; Mutz, 2015) and/or support for political violence (Warner & Villamil, 2017).

To test H1 and H2, we use OLS regression coefficients. To test RQ1 and H3, we point to the partially standardized effects coefficients produced though analysis of 5,000 bootstrapped resamples of the data. The bias-corrected 95% confidence intervals generated by this analysis indicate significance when the confidence intervals do not span zero. To compare the personal- and public-level attack conditions, we report and contrast partially standardized effect coefficients for the indirect effects (Hayes, 2018).

Study 1 Results

As illustrated in Figure 2, both personal-level and public-level attacks were perceived as significantly more impolite than the civil tweets. H1 was supported.

[3] For the direct effects of the stimuli on *impoliteness perceptions* and *attributions of malevolence* without the control variables, see Online Appendix C.

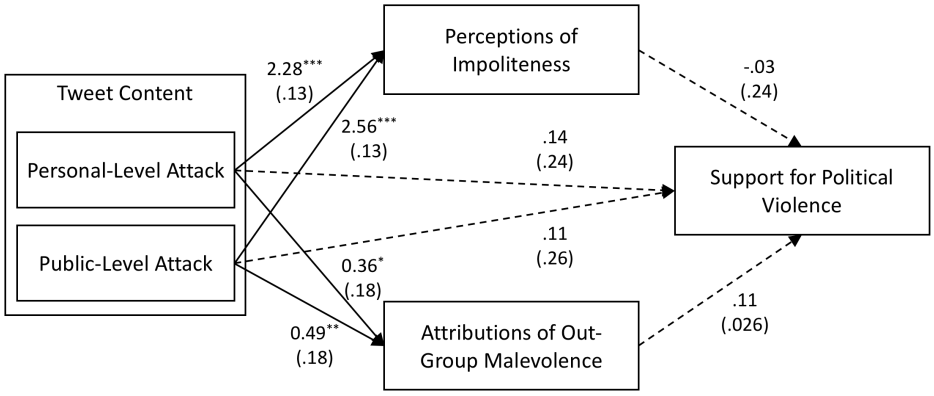


Figure 2. Indirect effects model for Study 1. B(SE).
******p < .001, *p < .05. Solid lines indicate significant paths and dashed lines indicate nonsignificant paths. Civil messages were used as a comparison group against personal- and public-level attacks.***

Similarly, both personal-level and public-level attacks increased attributions of out-group malevolence. The coefficients were of similar size, but to test whether there was a significant difference between the two types of attacks, we ran another indirect effects model using the public-level attacks condition as the reference group. There was no significant difference between the personal-level and public-level attacks in predicting attributions of malevolence (statistical details in Online Appendix D). This provides only limited evidence for H2. Both personal- and public-level attacks increased attributions of out-group malevolence compared with civil tweets, but there was no evidence that public-level attacks prompted more attributions of malevolence than personal-level attacks.

There were no significant indirect effects of either level of incivility on acceptance of political violence through either mediator (see Table 1). Thus, RQ1 was answered in the negative and H3 was not supported, at least in the context of Twitter messages.

Table 1. Study 1 Indirect Effects Predicting Support for Political Violence.

	Effect Coefficient	Bootstrapped *SE*	95% Confidence Interval
Message Content (X) → Support for Political Violence (Y)			
Civil vs. Personal Level	0.14	0.24	(−.3316, .6187)
Civil vs. Public Level	0.11	0.26	(−.4106, .6235)
Message Content (X) → Perceptions of Impoliteness (M1) → Support for Political Violence (Y)			
Civil vs. Personal Level	−0.07	0.29	(−.6360, .4973)
Civil vs. Public Level	−0.08	0.32	(−.7170, .5510)
Message Content (X) → Out-Group Malevolence (M1) → Support for Political Violence (Y)			
Civil vs. Personal Level	0.02	0.03	(−.0284, .0879)
Civil vs. Public Level	0.03	0.04	(−.0354, .1139)

Note. The direct effect coefficients provided by PROCESS are unstandardized, while the indirect effect coefficients are partially standardized.

Study 1 Discussion

Study 1 determined that personal- and public-level attacks can prompt more perceptions of impoliteness and attributions of out-group malevolence than civil messages. However, public-level incivility did not prompt more attributions of malevolence than personal-level incivility, and the tweets had no significant effects on support for political violence.

There were limitations, however. First, tweets are brief. Although there are many real-world examples of political attacks on Twitter, tweets may not strongly affect attitudes toward violence, at least not in one sitting with exposure to four tweets. This is especially pertinent for public-level attacks. It is possible that such short statements cannot fully capture delegitimizing rhetoric. Second, some of the tweets targeted individual, fictional candidates, while others targeted participants' in-groups more broadly. It is possible that the tweets targeted at fictional individual candidates were not strong enough to elicit an in-group threat in participants.

Finally, the mean support for violence was quite low at 1.92 (range: 1–5). This may be due to either (a) a social desirability effect or (b) a general measure of violence support (e.g., politicians should get a brick through the window) rather than a measure of support for violence in a specific instance with a specific target. Perhaps people are more likely to support violence when it is targeted *directly at* the person attacking one's in-group, or perhaps they are inclined to identify with a likeminded group that is using violent behaviors, even if they are not inclined to admit that the violence is acceptable. McLeod and Detenber (1999) provide a measure that may address these possibilities. Their work on the protest paradigm examines media coverage of protests—which emphasizes violent behaviors of protesters—as well as the effects of such coverage on audiences' ability to identify with those protesters. We suggest that measuring identification with violent protesters can allow participants to report support for (a) protesters behaving violently (rather than directly asking them to report support for violent behaviors) and (b) specific protesters responding violently to the political leader attacking their in-group. Thus, we raise a final research question:

RQ2: Do personal- and public-level attacks affect identification with violent protesters indirectly through impoliteness perceptions and attributions of out-group malevolence?

Study 2 Method

To address the shortcomings of Study 1, we ran a second experiment with more participants. We shifted the experimental context from Twitter to a speech about a political issue. We ensured that all attacks were about the participants' in-group party broadly rather than specific individuals. Finally, as explained in more detail below, we measured both support for political violence and identification with violent protesters.

Participants

We recruited 371 participants through MTurk in May 2018 using the qualification of U.S. political affiliation to generate a balanced partisan sample: 196 participants reported to MTurk an identification as liberals, and 195 reported an identification as conservatives.[4] Because we recruited participants using the MTurk qualification, we did not need to ask participants about their political predisposition in a pretest. Participants were, on average, 44.46 years old (*SD* = 13.86). Forty-eight percent were female, and 86% reported being White/Caucasian, 5% Black/African American, 4% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 4% another race. Participants had, on average, 15.39 years of education (*SD* = 1.80). The participants leaned slightly Democratic (range: 1 = *strong Republican* through 5 = *strong Democrat, M* = 3.21, *SD* = 1.48).

Procedure

Participants read the transcript of a political speech that discussed a participant's in-group party in one of three ways: worthy of respect (civil), incompetent but well-meaning (personal-level attack), or as a malicious enemy (public-level attack). After reading the speech, participants answered questions related to malevolence, impoliteness, violence support, and identification with violent protesters. When finished, they were paid $0.75.

Stimuli

Participants were exposed to a speech about prison reform. We used a total of six speeches—one set presented by a Democrat and one set by a Republican. The speaker was identified as a candidate for county commissioner and described as a member of the participant's out-group party. No picture or other attribute of the speaker was provided.

The speeches were similar on a number of characteristics. All were focused on prison reform, an issue that has received high-profile attention (Min Kim & Gearan, 2018). Each speech included an introduction, background on problems of the criminal justice system, two solutions, and a conclusion. The

[4] MTurk's Political Affiliation qualification separated participants based on political ideology rather than partisanship. Whether participants' posttest self-reported political partisanship matched or did not match their MTurk Political Affiliation did not substantially change the results. See Online Appendix E for details.

introduction and background information for the speeches were the same, and the mechanics of the speeches were comparable (795 to 808 words; readability grade level of between 10.5 and 11). The only differences between the partisan speeches were which party was named, the solution the speaker proposed (mental health courts and eliminating mandatory minimums for the Democrat; drug courts and private prisons for the Republican), and the wording of the civility/incivility so that the attacks were externally valid given the attacked party.

The approach to the out-group in the speech—civil, personal-level attack, public-level attacks—was randomly assigned. We manipulated the wording about the out-group party of the speaker in 10 places. In the civil condition, the speech referenced Republicans and Democrats working together and respecting each other ("we need to put aside our differences and solve this problem"). The speaker advocated for the Democratic or Republican solution to the problem and did not suggest that the alternative party would agree to the solutions, but actively respected the other party.

The uncivil attacks were largely drawn from digital comment sections and public social media posts. The personal-level attacks focused on the out-group party as incompetent ("idiot Republicans/Democrats") and employed real-world, partisan-specific name-calling ("spineless Republicans" versus "snowflake Democrats"). These attacks purposefully did not condemn the motives of the party but rather their intelligence and aptitude. The public-level attacks condition offered a stark difference by framing the other party as a conniving, bad-faith enemy ("villainous Republicans/Democrats") that directly threatened Americans ("Republicans/Democrats, by willfully ignoring the evidence, are traitors to the American people"; see Online Appendix F for stimuli).

Outcome Measures

To measure support for political violence, first, we used Kalmoe's (2014) *support for political violence* items (M = 1.79, SD = 0.89, Cronbach's α = .83).

Second, we added an activity that allowed us to measure identification with people engaging in violent behaviors. We told participants that the speech took place on a college campus and set off protests. They read a news article describing violent protests based on an actual article written after a protest at the University of California, Berkley. The article did not mention any issue positions held by protesters, only that they disagreed with the speaker, so all participants could react to the same article. After reading the article, participants reported their *identification with violent protesters* (McLeod & Detenber, 1999). The measure included three 5-point Likert-type items, ranging from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*: I share some of the protesters' viewpoints; The protesters' actions are justified; and I would consider getting involved with a group who supported causes similar to those of the protesters. All items were recorded such that higher scores show more *identification with violent protesters* (range: 1–5, M = 2.45, SD = 1.02, Cronbach's α = .76).[5]

[5] We also ran a robustness test using a stricter measure of identification with violent protesters. The results were substantially similar to those presented here. See Online Appendix G for details.

Mediating Variables

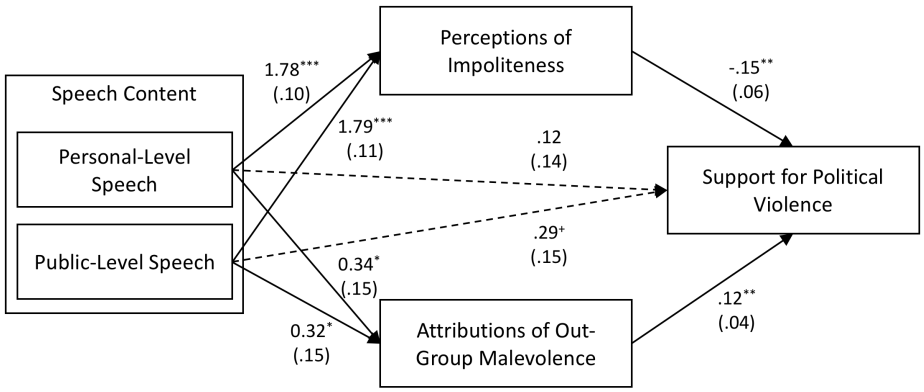
We measured both mediating variables—*perceptions of impoliteness* (M = 3.59, SD = 1.15, Cronbach's α = .91) and *out-group malevolence* (M = 3.20, SD = 1.13, Cronbach's α = .90)—in the same manner as Study 1. The mediating variables were moderately correlated (Pearson's r = .24, p < .001).

Analysis

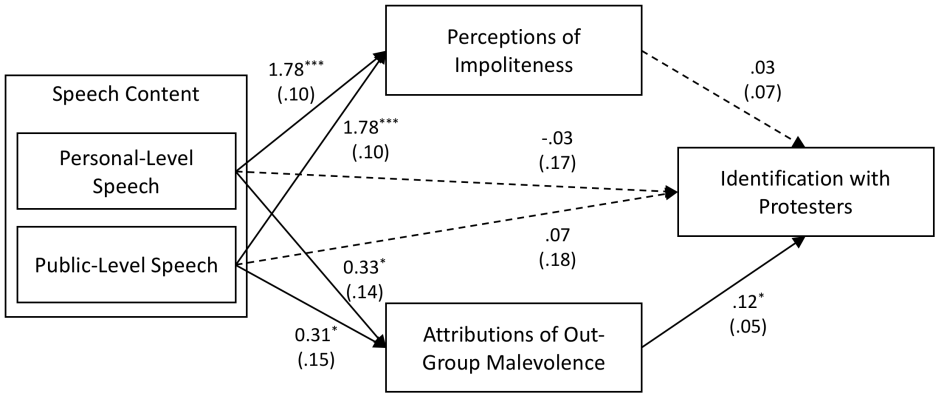
The analysis strategy in Study 2 was the same as in Study 1 except that two models were run, one for each of the outcome variables: *support for political violence* (Table 2, Model 1; Figure 3a), and *identification with the protesters* (Table 2, Model 2; Figure 3b). We included the same control variables as used in Study 1: participant sex, age, level of conflict avoidance (M = 3.45, SD = 0.98). and self-reported partisan strength (range: 0 = *nonpartisan* to 3 = *strong partisan*, M = 1.36, SD = 0.60).

Study 2 Results

As illustrated in Figure 3a and 3b, both personal-level and public-level attacks significantly predicted an increase in *impoliteness perceptions*. Consistent with Study 1, H1 was supported.



(a) Support for political violence



(b) Identification with violent protesters

Figure 3. Indirect effects models for Study 2. B(SE). ***p < .001, *p < .05. Solid lines indicate significant paths and dashed lines indicate nonsignificant paths. Civil messages were used as a comparison group against personal- and public-level attacks.

As in Study 1, both personal-level and public-level attacks increased *attributions of out-group malevolence* (see Figure 3a & 3b). Again, the coefficients were of similar size, and we found no significant difference between personal-level and public-level attacks on out-group malevolence attributions (see Online Appendix D). There was only some support for H2. Public-level attacks prompted more malevolent attributions toward the out-group compared with civil speeches but not compared with personal-level attacks. These results replicated the core findings from Study 1.

We turn to indirect effects analyses to determine whether the messages influenced support for political violence through *perceptions of impoliteness* (RQ1) and *attributions of malevolence* (H3). First, we examined the indirect effects of the speech conditions on the outcome variable *support for political violence* (see Table 2, Model 1 and Figure 3a). Contra Study 1, both attack speeches had a significant negative effect on *support for political violence*. Compared with civil speeches, the speeches with personal- and public-level attacks increased *perceptions of impoliteness* which, in turn, decreased the *support for political violence.*

Table 2. Study 2 Indirect Effects Predicting Support for Protesters.

	Model 1 Support for Political Violence (Y1)			Model 2 Identification with Protesters (Y2)		
	Effect Coefficient	Bootstrapped *SE*	95% Confidence Interval	Effect Coefficient	Bootstrapped *SE*	95 % Confidence Interval
Message Content (X) → (Y)						
Civil vs. Personal Level	0.12	0.14	(−.1625, .4056)	−0.03	0.17	(−.3769, .3078)
Civil vs. Public Level	0.29	0.15	(−.0024, .5733)	0.07	0.18	(−.2777, .4151)
Message Content (X) → Perceptions of Impoliteness (M1) → (Y)						
Civil vs. Personal Level	**−0.31**	**0.12**	**(−.5406, −.0604)**	0.06	0.12	(−.1642, .3035)
Civil vs. Public Level	**−0.31**	**0.13**	**(−.5547, −.0609)**	0.06	0.12	(−.1668, .2988)
Message Content (X) → Out-Group Malevolence (M1) → (Y)						
Civil vs. Personal Level	**0.05**	**0.03**	**(.0053, .1056)**	**0.04**	**0.03**	**(.0015, .0941)**
Civil vs. Public Level	**0.04**	**0.03**	**(.0020, .1045)**	0.04	0.02	(−.0001, .0900)

Note. The direct effect coefficients provided by PROCESS are unstandardized while the indirect effect coefficients are partially standardized. Significant indirect effects are in boldface.

Alternatively, both attack speeches indirectly increased *support for political violence* by increasing *attributions of malevolence.* The relative partial standardized effect coefficients were nearly identical between the personal- and public-level conditions, suggesting that the effects were not different between the two types of attacks. Comparing the partial standardized effect coefficients across mediating variables, the indirect effects through *perceptions of impoliteness* (effect = −0.31) were larger than the indirect effects through *out-group malevolence* (effect = .04 and .05).

Finally, we turn to the *identification with violent protesters* model (see Table 2, Model 2, and Figure 3b). Compared with civil speeches, personal-level attacks (but not public-level attacks) increased *identification with violent protesters* through *out-group malevolence*. Contrastingly, speeches with personal- and public-level attacks had no significant effect on *identification with protesters* through *perceptions of impoliteness*. The relative standardized effect coefficients were, again, similar across the personal- and public-level attack conditions, but here the magnitude of the effects were also similar between *impoliteness perceptions* (effect ~ −0.06) and *attributions of malevolence* (effect ~ 0.04).

These tests offer nuanced results related to RQ1, H3, and RQ2. In answering RQ1, *perceptions of impoliteness* negatively mediated the effect of the speech on *support for political violence,* but did not mediate the effect on *identification with the protesters*. Additionally, H3 was only slightly supported. *Attributions of malevolence* significantly mediated the effects of the speech condition on support for political violence, but personal-level attacks were no less likely than public-level attacks to influence support for violence through attributions of malevolence. Finally, in response to RQ2, *attributions of malevolence,* but not *impoliteness perceptions*, mediated the effect of personal-level uncivil attacks on *identification with violent protesters*.

Study 2 Discussion

Study 2 provides an intriguing test of attitudes toward political violence. In all cases, the speeches significantly influenced attitudes about violence and violent groups, though the paths through which they had this effect were different for various types of violence support. For the *support for political violence* outcome, *perceptions of impoliteness* drove the indirect effect, whereas for the *identification with violent protesters* outcome, *attributions of malevolence* drove the indirect effect. Personal- and public-level attacks had similar effects on perceptions of impoliteness, attributions of malevolence, and the outcome variables. In the only instance where there was a difference between personal- and public-level attacks, *personal-level* attacks had an indirect effect on *identification with violent protesters* through *attributions of malevolence*, not *public-level attacks* as predicted. In sum, speeches that attacked a person's in-group party tended to decrease support for violent behaviors through perceptions of impoliteness, but increase identification with protesters who engaged in those violent behaviors through attributions of malevolence.

General Discussion

The results of two experimental studies with national U.S. samples suggest that, when individuals are exposed to attacks on their in-group political party compared with messages that emphasize respect for that party, they perceive impoliteness and attribute malevolent motives toward their out-group party. In the context of a speech by an out-group member, these perceptions of impoliteness decreased support for violence and

attributions of malevolence increased identification with violent protesters. Finally, public-level incivility, despite the focus on delegitimizing rhetoric, did not prompt more attributions of malevolence than personal-level incivility. The results of these studies have a number of theoretical and normative implications.

The finding that exposure to either type of uncivil attack results in greater attribution of malevolence is problematic given the prevalence of incivility in political discourse (Mutz, 2015; Sobieraj & Berry, 2011) and the normatively undesirable consequences of attribution of malevolence. Attribution of malevolence is an antidemocratic attitude because it undermines the incentive to compromise and thus promotes legislative gridlock (Warner et al., 2019). It has also been linked to acceptance of political violence in past research (Warner et al., 2019; Warner & Villamil, 2017), though these studies used a different operationalization of the outcome than the measures adopted here. We only observed a significant connection between attribution of malevolence and acceptance of violence in Study 2, though the link was present in all approaches to violence support used in Study 2. Regardless, attribution of malevolence is a problematic political attitude; our finding that both public and personal-level attacks exacerbate this attitude highlights the value of encouraging political leaders to use civility in an effort to improve the health of our democratic culture.

Conversely, incivility also appears to exert a countervailing force on support for political violence through politeness norms. As people recognize more norm violations present in a speech, they express less support for violent behaviors. This offers more evidence that recognition of norm violations can mediate political communication effects (Muddiman et al., 2020), though it also counters the theoretical link between impoliteness and increased violence posited in the workplace communication literature (e.g., Ghosh, Jacobs, et al., 2011). We speculate several potential reasons for this effect. First, perhaps perceiving an out-group attack as impolite, which as Mutz (2015) explains is a violation of a social norm, reminds people that they do not like such behaviors and thus do not want to support more extreme norm violations like violence. Similarly, it may be that, when an out-group party member engages in political attacks that a person perceives to be impolite, that person may think about *an out-group party member* engaging in violence, decreasing support for such violence. Alternatively, a paradoxical thinking mechanism might be at work here (Hameiri, Nabet, Bar-Tal, & Halperin, 2018). When people are exposed to extreme, hyperbolic versions of their own beliefs, they paradoxically may be *more* likely to reevaluate their beliefs. Perhaps what we uncovered here is that exposure to counterattitudinal hyperbole from an out-group can also prompt people to think in different ways. In all, impoliteness perception was the strongest mediating predictor of support for political violence—but only in Study 2 and only when directly measuring generally violent behaviors. We understand this result as an important first step in testing the often discussed ("NPR/PBS NewsHour/Marist," 2018; Obama, 2011) link between negative language and violence. Future studies should attempt to replicate this result and investigate why impoliteness and decreased violence support are related.

The fact that perceptions of impoliteness and attribution of malevolence had opposite effects on acceptance of political violence also suggests that there may be unobserved moderators. Whereas some participants appear to have reacted to the impolite messages by recognizing the norm violations, others must have reacted by engaging in attributions of malevolence. We measured some individual characteristics that we considered as potential moderators, but only found a significant moderating effect of age, and even then, only in one study and only through perceptions of impoliteness (see Online Appendix H for statistical

details). Thus, we can only speculate about which types of people react with aversion to rudeness and which react by impinging the character of the political out-group. Anderson and Bushman's (2002) general aggression model would be a productive site for future research on this topic.

It is also important to note that people do not simply view every message from an out-group as impolite and originating from an illegitimate political opponent. In fact, messages where political figures made an effort to reach across the aisle to the opposing party—even while pointing out that the parties differ in their positions on the issue—prompted more positive attitudes than the attacking messages. Remarkably in today's polarized climate, these messages do exist (see Jackson, 2018). Our study suggests that political figures who emphasize the legitimacy of an opposing party may weaken partisan divides.

Despite the varying normative implications of the different types of uncivil attacks (Burke, 1937; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018), public-level attacks did not prompt more attributions of malevolence than personal-level attacks in either study. In fact, in Study 2, *personal-level*, rather than public-level, incivility increased support for identification with violent protesters. Both personal- and public-level verbal attacks are impolite, which may have made the attacks seem similar to participants (see also Muddiman, 2017). Nobody wants their own side to be attacked, so this result is understandable. Yet there is a normative difference between attacks on opponents' competence and attacks that paint opponents as illegitimate, villainous traitors (Burke, 1937; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). It is troubling that the public does not react consistently to these differences. This result should encourage researchers to explore ways the public can be prompted to recognize the difference between types of attacks.

There are limitations to note. First, we conducted studies using U.S. participants recruited through MTurk. Testing the effects of partisan attacks in the U.S. is useful because of the clear distinctions between in- and out-groups in a two-party system. However, future studies should replicate the tests with different samples, especially in countries with other political systems and where polarization may not be as prevalent. Additionally, we focused on out-group attacks on an in-group. There is theoretical support for the power of attacks from out-group political party on the in-group (Branscombe et al., 1999), but in-group attacks on an out-group are worth exploring as well. We also examine two mediating measures that are more cognitive than emotional. Given the prevalence of research emphasizing the role of affective polarization in U.S. politics (e.g., Iyengar et al., 2012; Mason, 2018), it would be useful for future researchers to also take affective predictors of political violence support into account. Finally, like others examining political violence (Kalmoe, 2014; Warner & Villamil, 2017), we study the attitudinal variable of *support* for violence, not violent behaviors themselves. As this line of research progresses, more studies need to examine behavior.

Even given these limitations, this project offers a number of contributions. To the violence literature, we add evidence that not all verbal political attacks—even those that assert the illegitimacy of a political party—increase expressed support for violent behaviors. In fact, these types of messages may remind people of politeness norms and *decrease* their support for violence. Not all of the results are so encouraging, however. Verbal attacks may also increase identification with likeminded groups that enact violent behaviors, no matter the type of attack, through attributing malevolent intent to an out-group. To the incivility literature, this project offers a puzzle: Why do individuals not see a difference between a personal attack and one attempting to delegitimize an opponent? To our participants, an attack on

competence was not consistently different than an attempt to paint the opposition as an enemy. Given the concerns scholars (Burke, 1937; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018) have about delegitimizing rhetoric, the implications of the public's *lack* of differentiation need to be explored in the future.

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